

Mutual Aid vs Charity

And how we can build a mass socialist movement

To understand what mutual aid is, we must first understand what it is not. Mutual aid in a socialist context is not charity. We must also understand that mutual aid is not without criticism, but we can work to minimize those contradictions by employing certain tactics.

What is Charity?

Charity is defined as giving money or resources to those in need. On the surface that does not sound like a bad thing, but in a socialist context, charity is harmful work. Typically, charity work involves people with power allocating resources to those that meet certain criteria set by those in power. In other words, the recipients are “means-tested.” A means test is a determination of whether or not a family or individual is eligible for assistance. This could range from whether or not they have a government issued ID or mailing address, drug use or behavior, or if they meet an income based requirement. In other words, charity requires the recipient to meet certain social requirements before receiving any assistance. This behavior reinforces control dynamics and hierarchies present in capitalist social relations.

Charity is a by-product of capitalism, often used by wealthy liberals to absolve them of their sins of exploitation of the working class and other marginalized groups of people. Charity assumes the recipient of resources is incapable, lacking in autonomy, and has nothing to offer back to society.

What is Mutual Aid?

Mutual aid can be simply defined as a communal sharing of resources. It resists control dynamics, hierarchies, and system-affirming, oppressive arrangements that exist within charity and social services. Mutual aid assumes the recipient of aid is capable, autonomous, and already possesses resources or skills that can be offered back to the community that is supporting them at that moment. With mutual aid we can build social relations that are more survivable than the ones built by charity, as there is no power structure at play here. Decisions are made democratically, as opposed to made by a board or by means-testing.

Mutual aid is also one component of building dual power. Dual power is the strategy of building power through the creation of institutions that run counter to the current dominant-power institutions. Dominant-power institutions are those which exist to facilitate capitalism and the capitalist state. These institutions are entrenched in, and serve to perpetuate, hetero-patriarchy, white supremacy, settler-colonialism, and imperialism. Examples of dual power counter-institutions include worker and tenant unions, community gardens, worker owned cooperatives, community owned energy, and community defense. The goal of dual power is to build alternatives to the dominant-power institutions so that we may challenge, and eventually displace them. In the short term this strategy improves material conditions by meeting needs left unaddressed by capitalism. In the long term these counter-institutions allow us to experiment with ways of organizing a socialist society.

A great example of mutual aid programs in the context of the US is the programs built by the Black Panther Party. The Black Panther Party started as a community defense organization in Oakland, CA. Eventually they built more programs to help the black and brown communities in which they protected. They built up breakfast programs, free health clinics and ambulances, and other survival programs. These programs were successful because the Black Panther Party made sure to include political education as part of these programs.

How to Address Contradictions of Mutual Aid?

As we have discussed, mutual aid programs can improve the material conditions of our communities and help us to build dual-power. For these reasons, many new organizers are drawn to mutual aid – seeing it as an easy and impactful way to begin getting involved. However, experienced organizers know that mutual aid programs have a tendency to veer back into charity if not executed with care. Because of the capitalist context in which we exist, where all goods and services have been commodified and class hierarchies influence every interaction, we must be intentional that “mutual aid” programs are truly “mutual”. Otherwise, we risk perpetuating the same power imbalances that disempower participants and result in simple charity. We can avoid this by implementing two tactics: Mass Line and Political Education.

Mass line is a methodology which comes from Marxist-Leninist-Maoist theory. It can be summed up as “from the masses, to the masses, from the masses.” Essentially it is a cyclical process that involves meeting with the community and talking to them to understand their needs. These conversations are then analyzed dialectically to determine what underlying material conditions need to be addressed. This information is returned to the masses, the conditions are addressed, and the process begins again. By following this method, we can start to understand the real needs of our community and how to address them as a socialist organization. Mass line involves us getting in the weeds and talking to the community, instead of standing back and assuming what would help, and mutual aid is a great opportunity to employ this method.

We must also inject political education into our mutual aid activities, just as the Black Panther Party did. They did so because they understood that, if we wish to build dual power, we must awaken the masses through education. We use the term “awaken” intentionally, as marginalized individuals already know well what it means to be oppressed by capitalist power structures, but they may not yet know why. Teaching about topics such as class, seizing the means of production, and the value of labor are a great way to start building class consciousness and solidarity. If we want these programs to truly be mutual aid and not just charity, we must engage with the masses and raise their level of class consciousness and political activity.

In Conclusion

Mutual aid addresses the power imbalance present in charity and other capitalist systems. With mutual aid we are not only helping marginalized people in our community, but also building a dual power system outside of the capitalist system. This is done by employing mass line and political education tactics in order to engage the community and get them politically active. It feels great to help your community, but it feels even better to create a mass socialist movement to address class contradictions and liberate marginalized and oppressed people.

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